Constrained by Love

“For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Corinthians 5:14–15).

“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

“But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

A Love We Did Not Seek

There is something in the gospel that should stop us in our tracks. The love that drives all of Christian living, the love that sent the Son of God to Calvary, the love that opens blind eyes and raises dead hearts, was set on us before we had any capacity to seek it, deserve it, or even want it. We did not come to God and find Him willing. He came to us while we were still His enemies.

I have been thinking about a question that I believe deserves a direct answer. Why did God plan to save sinners before the world began? The Bible teaches this without hesitation. Why did He send His Son into the world? Why did He pursue sinners, open blind eyes, raise dead hearts, and hold His people all the way to glory? The Bible’s answer is simply this: because He loved us.

That is a truth worth pausing over. We did not seek Him first. In our natural condition, we were not reaching toward God or longing for His fellowship. Scripture is painfully honest about that. “No one seeks for God” (Romans 3:11). We were sinners, spiritually dead, at odds with the very God who made us. And yet, while we were in that condition, God loved us. Before we ever turned toward Him, before we repented, believed, or prayed a single prayer, the love of God was already at work on our behalf. As the Apostle John puts it, “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10). The initiative was entirely His.

This love did not begin at the cross, as remarkable as the cross is. It began before time itself. The plan of redemption was formed in the eternal counsel of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit before the world’s foundations were laid. At its heart, the doctrine of election is a love story. God set His love on His people in eternity past, not because of anything He foresaw in them, but

because it pleased Him to do so in His sovereign grace. Paul says that God "chose us in him before the foundation of the world" and that He "predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace" (Ephesians 1:4–6). Long before any of us drew a single breath, we were loved.

The Cross: Where Love Was Defined

It is at the cross that this love finds its fullest and most costly expression. Every theological word we might study, substitution, propitiation, redemption, and reconciliation, points back to the same place: a hill outside Jerusalem where the Son of God died in the place of sinners. The Apostle Paul never lost his sense of wonder over this. Writing to the Corinthians, he does not just describe the cross as an important doctrine. He says it "controls" him (2 Corinthians 5:14). The love shown there seized his life and redirected it completely.

Think about what that cross represents. The eternal Son of God, the Lord of glory, took on human flesh, entered into our suffering, and bore in His own body the full weight of the judgment we deserved. He who knew no sin was made sin for us. He who was perfectly righteous stood in our place and absorbed the wrath of a holy God, not because He had to, but because He loved us. "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). That is what love means, not just a feeling or sentiment, but a willing sacrifice for those who do not deserve it.

Whenever we want to know what the love of God looks like, the Bible points us to Calvary. It does not point us to our feelings about God or our experience of His blessings, but to the cross. John writes, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us" (1 John 3:16). The cross is God's permanent and unambiguous answer to any doubt about whether He truly loves His people. It cost Him everything, and He gave it freely.

A Love That Will Not Leave Us Still

Paul's point in 2 Corinthians 5 is not simply that we should admire the love of Christ from a safe distance. He says this love "controls" us, or as older translations say, "constrains" us. The word means being pressed on all sides, hemmed in, unable to move in any direction except the one this love demands. When a person truly grasps that Christ died for them, it changes them. It cannot do otherwise.

Paul explains the logic clearly. Christ's death is sufficient for all and freely offered to all, so that those who receive Him by faith no longer live for themselves. They live for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. This is the proper response to the gospel, not just believing its facts, but being so captivated by its love that our whole orientation shifts. We stop asking, “What do I want?” and begin asking, “What does He want?” We stop living as if our lives belong to us and start living as those who were “bought with a price” (1 Corinthians 6:20).

This love also compels us to move outward, toward others. Paul’s ministry was not driven by ambition or duty alone. It was driven by the same love that sent Christ to the cross. Having been loved at such a cost, he could not keep the news to himself. He writes that he had become “all things to all people, that by all means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22). The cross had broken down every barrier of pride and self-preservation. Love had made him a servant.

Few lives in the modern era illustrate this more clearly than that of Jim Elliot, a young American missionary who gave his life in January 1956 while trying to reach the Huaorani (also called Waorani or Auca) people of Ecuador with the gospel. He and four companions were killed by the very tribe they had come to serve. Years before his death, Elliot had written in his journal, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.” Elliot was not speaking in theory. He had been so captured by the love of Christ, so constrained by what the Savior had given for him, that holding on to his own life seemed a poor bargain in comparison. The cross had reordered everything. What the world counted as gain, he counted as loss, and what the world called foolishness he understood to be the only reasonable response to so great a love.

This is the pattern the New Testament holds out for every believer. “We love because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). We serve because we have been served at infinite cost. We give because we have received what we could never have earned. The love of Christ does not make us passive. It produces people who, in the best sense, cannot sit still. They have seen the cross and cannot keep quiet about it. They have tasted grace and want others to taste it too. They have been loved and are, almost helplessly, moved to love in return.

Let This Love Have Its Way

If you are a Christian, do not let that love remain just a doctrine in your mind. Let it do what it did to Paul. Let it constrain you. Let it press in from every side until you find yourself living not for yourself but for Him who died and rose again. Let it move you toward the neighbor who needs to hear the gospel, toward the struggling brother or sister in your church, toward the ministry you have been putting off, and toward the prayer you have been meaning to pray.

The famous Reformer John Calvin, commenting on 2 Corinthians 5:14, wrote that the love of Christ "so occupies" the believer that he has no room left for himself. That is exactly right. A heart that has truly reckoned with the cross, with what it cost and what it accomplished, is, in the best and freest sense, taken captive. There is no higher motivation for Christian living and ministry than this. Not duty, not fear, not reputation, but love; the love that chose us before time began, that came to us while we were still sinners, and that will never let us go.

We did not love Him first. We could not. But He loved us, and that has made all the difference!

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, we marvel that You loved us before we ever loved You, that Your grace found us while we were yet sinners, and that the giving of Your own Son was the measure of that love. Forgive us for the times we have treated this love as a theological truth alone, holding it at arm's length rather than letting it take hold of our lives. By Your Spirit, cause the love of Christ to constrain us as it constrained the Apostle Paul. May it move us to serve, to give, to go, and to tell. May it be the motive behind all that we do and the joy beneath all that we endure. We pray this in the name of the One who loved us and gave Himself for us, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.